

[Reuben and his Restaurant]

Beliefs and customs - Folk Stuff

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview 9

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Arnold Manoff

ADDRESS 27 Hamilton ?Terrace New York

DATE December 18, 1938

SUBJECT REUBEN AND HIS RESTAURANT**"THE LORE OF A SANDWICH"

1. Date and time of interview December 13, 1938 afternoon
2. Place of interview Reuben's Restaurant and Squibb Building on Fifth Ave.
3. Name and address of informant Arnold Reuben 8 East 58 St.
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

Pearl Winig and Maurice Zolotow, Squibb Building,

5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

Saul Levitt 27 Hamilton Terrace

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6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc. Interview with Mr. Reuben took place in his office in the Squibb Building. Office large and expensively furnished. Soft taupe broadloom carpeting, three piece leather office suite. Large semi-modern desk in center of room. Bay window facing on Fifth Ave. Venetian blinded. A rubber plant behind the blinds is the only note of personal character. The room is an expensive attempt at dignity, "high class" stuff, but it has no more individual character than a show window in Lord and Taylors. Close observation will spot two small framed pictures on the desk. Assume to be of Mr. Reuben's wife and daughter. Outside offices typical busy, bright, and clattering publicity and 2 clerical set up.

The restaurant around the corner can be briefly described as an interior near Fifth Ave., designed to resemble the lounge room of the Radio City Music Hall, soft light, subdued lighting rich carpeting and Mr. Reuben's stuffed fish mounted around the walls. A small bar near the checkroom and a delicatessen counter in the back.

More detailed, this is the impression you got of Reuben's. You're walking up 58th St. toward Fifth Ave. Suddenly the wall of brick to your left is ended and the periphery of your eye catches a huge pane of glass curtained in cream folds and shrubberied formally at the bottom. A red blazing neon sprawls over the window REUBENS. Typical. This is REUBENS! Who is Reuben that his name should stand alone without a word of explanation without even a first name, without a Company or Inc. after it? What the hell! You don't mind GENERAL MOTORS; Money! Power! Industry. Well, all right, REUBEN. Twenty Five feet long, five feet high on 58th St. Right next to the Savoy Plaza, the Sherry Netherland. Nearby Central Park, the old Plaza, Fifth Ave. Nearby Park Ave. A ritzy restaurant, if you judge by what you can't see from the outside. A doorman attends inside a heavy revolving door. You light a cigarette; a tall dame slithers out from the revolving door. She's fur coated, slightly stewed and she breezes into a waiting taxi. You figure what the hell! and go inside. The attendant looks you over. You look him over. He see's somebody nondescript carrying a portfolio. You see a tall good-looking guy dressed stiff

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shirt formal, waiter-black not too well-dressed but good enough, get it. To the right the entrance to the restaurant proper. To the left a small circular bar surrounding waist-high a red jacketed white soap-shiny young bartender with fixed, tired, cynical smile on face. Liquor bottles gleam, shine, spit fragrant alcoholic labels, stew juice, all kinds stew juice right in your eye. The bar is red and silver and black, clean, spotless, roccoco so and chromium for 'tis the twentieth century. You're talking to the attendant; you're explaining your mission to the artificial stud in his white starched bosom. His face is professional [?] enigma somewhere on top of you. Your eye spots words pasted black over a circular lighting fixture above the bar. 3 What are the words? What do they say? They must have cost more than three hundred dollars to get themselves so resplendently stuck up there. That's same price for words. The pulp magazines pay a penny a word. The new [New Masses?] pays less. Esquire, pays around five cents a word. What kind of special, powerfuls meaningful, profound universal all-encompassing words must these words be? You prepare yourself for a devastating literary thrillblow. A wise-crack terrific, a bar-wisdom ancient and glorious, Greek in form, American in spirit. What say the words? "Friendship Is Life's Most Wondrous Treasure" and "Gather Ye All Here Who Have Forsaken Gloom." Three hundred dollars, kid.

You get to Reuben's secretary. She's taking dough behind the Delicatessan counter right off the check room. She says wait. You wait in a corner. You haven't been in the restaurant proper yet. Later, after you have interviewed Mr. Reuben in his office around the corner, you come back to the restaurant through the kitchen and you sit there a while with Mr. Reuben's son in one of the half enclosed booths which are set in a square around the floor. Mr. Reuben invited you to have a piece of his famous cheese cake and a cup of coffee, but somehow the young Mr. Reuben forgot to order it for you and so you just sat there watching him eat in the big room empty of customers and full of mounted fish and soft lights.

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FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Arnold Manoff

ADDRESS 27 Hamilton Terrace

DATE December 18, 1938

SUBJECT REUBEN AND HIS RESTAURANT - "THE LORE OF A SANDWICH"

1. Ancestry German Jewish
2. Place and date of birth Germany some 53 years ago
3. Family
4. Places lived in, with dates
5. Education, with dates
6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates Restaurantkeeper, former delicatessen store owner, and peddler.
7. Special skills and interests Special skill at concocting sandwiches. Interested in fishing.
8. Community and religious activities
9. Description of informant

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Aggressive, brusque appearance. Speaks very rapidly with vigorous gestures of the hands. Light-footed and energetic in movement. Big strong healthy face, twiches as he talks. Healthy and alive in the Broadway nervous tempo manner. 10. [???] words roll out of his mouth in a spitting, swishing thick torrent; accent occasionally German, occasionally Broadway, once in a while pseudo-drahmahtic; intonations mixed Yiddish, Broadway wise guy, clipped executive style, and big-man, really-boy-at-heart, petulant, lisping, ain't-I-charming manner.

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FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Arnold Manoff

ADDRESS 27 Hamilton Terrace New York

DATE December 18, 1938

SUBJECT REUBEN AND HIS RESTAURANT -"THELORE OF A SANDWICH"

Well, boys, sit down; what can I tell you? Here you see me busy like all the time; what is it; a book? kinda success story you want? hah, hek, well, you know, I've been written up. Well, boys, of course there's the story of how I came to make my sandwiches and that, boys, is the story of my life, I suppose. Well, somebody once put it, "From a sandwich to a national institution" And that, boys, is the story of Arnold Reuben's life. You know, I used to be a peddlar when I was a kid and I used to own a little shtoonky delicatessen store on Seventy Third Street and Broadway. Well, today, you got a look at the layout downstairs didn't you? Well, what do you think of it? Nice, uh? Well, you know we've got

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all the celebrities coming in and out almost any night and they eat my sandwiches, so once I got the idea to name a sandwich after a celebrity, and that's how it all started. Sort of somebody once said I was the father of the sandwich. Have you ever eaten a Reuben Special? Yeh, boys, we get orders for a Reuben Special Air-mail from California. We ship all over the world. From a Sandwich to a National Institution. Look, boys, I sit up here and sometimes I laugh; you know, I laugh up my sleeve. Other delicatessan men, they began where I did in a shtoonky little store someplace, dirty, filthy, no machines then, everything by hand, well they never had any ideas. During the war I made a nice little pile. You know war time. Well 2 then, every little delicatessan owner used to keep a few cans of anchovies and caviar in stock. Just a few cans at a time. Well, I figure it out that when things really get going nobody would be able to import the stuff. So what do you think I did? I went around to each little shtoonky place buying up a few cans at a time, and when things got hot and you couldn't get some good anchovies or caviar for love or money, who do you think you had to come to? Yes boys, you see! Well, I'll tell you about how I got the sandwich idea. I owned a delicatessan on Broadway and one day a dame walks in, one of the theatrical dames, and she's down and out I suppose, and she asks me for something to eat. Her name was Anna Selos. Well, I'm feeling sort of good, so I figure I'll clown around for the dame. That's how it all came about. I'm clowning for the dame. Well, what do I do? I take a holy bread that I used to keep and grab up the knife and, you know, clowning like, I cut it right through on the bias. Then I take some roast beef, I don't remember exactly what. But, anyway, I figure I'll put anything on. So I take some meat and cheese and I slap it on, and I put on some spice and stuff and I make her up a sandwich; it was a foot high. Well the dame just eats it, that's all. She must have been plenty hungry. And when she gets through she says, "Mr. Reuben, that's the best sandwich I ever tasted in my life." Well, the idea comes to me in a flash. I'll call it the Anna Selos sandwich, after the dame. Then, one night, she brings some friends up, you know, stage people and a newspaper man, and this guy he goes right behind the counter and makes himself up a sandwich, and then he tells me why I don't call the sandwich after celebrities? Like what happened with Anna Selos. Why don't I call it the Anna Selos sandwich? Well, boys, in

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a flash, I get the idea. Anna Selos! I'll call it a Reuben Special. And that's how it started. Then one day Marjorie Rambeau came in to the store and I made her a sandwich and I called it the Marjorie Rambeau sandwich. How did I do it? Well, I just slap it together. Whatever came into my mind. But I used good stuff. Once Nikita Baileff, you know, of the Chauve Souria, came into the place downstairs and he knew that I made sandwiches for famous people and named it for them. So he says to me, "Mr. Reuben, 3 make me a sandwich." Just like that. Well, I don't say no. I say sure, and in a flash I made him a sandwich. I went into the kitchen and I grabbed some whole wheat bread, slapped some tongue on it, some bar-le-due, sweep pickle and cream cheese and called it Chauve Souris. No, boys, I don't know exactly how I create sandwiches. It just comes to me in a flash.

I'm not like the average delicatessen man, boys. Ideas, I always had ideas about things. When I create a sandwich I try to make it fit the character and temperament of the celebrity. Now you take Walter Winchell. I made him a sandwich of roast beef, swiss cheese and sliced dill pickle. Oh there's so many of them, boys, it just goes on and on.